

China Theoretical Framing by the EU

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Introduction. For many years, relations between China and Europe were determined by the political initiative of Europe. In accordance with the established practice, the EU has formed the political agenda of bilateral relations, and China has had (not always successfully, though) to conform to it. Two terms – “engagement” and “stakeholder” became especially relevant to the EU approach of China.

The aim. The aim of the respective study is to reveal some narrow points of the two conceptual approaches.

Materials and methods. Two theoretical concepts (“engagement” and “stakeholder”) is an object of observation, and not the basic instrument of the research. The main method can be designated as conceptual analysis.

Results. The concept of engagement is a piece of political science baggage imported from the US, and it by definition presupposes an unfriendly partner whose behavior should be shaped in the right direction. According to authoritative American scientists Richard N. Haass and Meghan L. O’Sullivan, “The distinguishing feature of American engagement strategies is their reliance on the extension or provision of incentives to shape the behaviour of countries with which the US has important disagreements” [Haass and O’Sullivan, 2000; Terms of Engagement: Alternatives to Punitive Policies].

In Europe the engagement concept was looked upon as a useful tool for “shaping the behaviour” of China, from which it was expected that it will meet the requirements of Europe, because these requirements meet the interests of China. It is openly declared by one of the leading European experts on China François Godement. In a book written together with a co-author he stated, “Building on this approach, the EU aims to persuade the Chinese leadership that it is in its own interests to do what Europeans ask” [Fox & Godement, 2009, A Power Audit of EU-China Relations, London: European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)].

The “stakeholder” concept has been included into the EU political lexicon after 2005, when the US Deputy State Secretary Robert Zoellick during his China visit offered it as a new strategy for US-China relations. The stakeholder theory is accompanied by different confusing approaches and, what is more, it is taken from corporate management practice. Zoellick offered his own interpretation of the concept as applied to international relations. He suggested that China and US should become mutual stakeholders with shared responsibility [Zoellick, 2007, From the Shanghai Communiqué to “Responsible Stakeholder” – Remarks at “The China Balance Sheet in 2007 and Beyond”]. However, the question remains as to who will manage this international corporation, in which China, America and other countries will become shareholders. Who will define the rules of conduct, if China and the US will position themselves as owners of stocks? When adopting this theory, the EU has also left this question unanswered.

Conclusions. European choice of conceptual approaches towards China can not be considered successful. Both theoretical frames – “engagement” and “stakeholder” impose discourse of disparities.